

Rev. Sue Larson Immanuel Lutheran Church Watertown, WI

14th Sunday after Pentecost, Sept. 1-2, 2014 Immanuel Lutheran
Church

Dear Friends in Christ, grace to you and peace from God who made us,

has redeemed us, and God the Spirit who fills our hearts and guides our living every day. Let us pray: Lord, on this weekend in which we honor the work of all who labor, watch over us and give us your gratitude for all you provide and thanksgiving for the work of all who support and nurture us. AMEN.

Well, it's here – the weekend that separates the long warm days of summer from the slow slide into cool nights and turning leaves and the coming of the season of fall. For all who love football, this is your time! The games have started, the schedules are posted and the tickets may already be in your hand.

This also is the weekend in which we give thanks for and reflect on our

various occupations. ELCA Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson has written a

Labor Day reflection saying that the workplace is where many of us spend the

majority of our waking hours. Our work places have a profound influence on our lives, he says, so it is important to recognize how our work environments shape us as well as to think about the ways that we can influence the policies and practices and cultures of our workplaces.

Today's gospel from Mark 7 brings up a cultural conflict between the religious leaders who kept a close eye on Jesus. They had the luxury of observing the most exacting of religious rules and wanted to know why Jesus and his group didn't do the same. There are some obvious reasons why the disciples and ordinary people didn't wash with regularity. They didn't have slaves or servants to bring them the water when they needed it nor were they always near enough to a water source to find any. Then, as now, water in Palestine was a precious commodity. So the religious leaders insistence on being more stringent and observant came across as a kind of arrogance. The culture in

which they were operating didn't work for the people who didn't have the resources

to do the same.

That way that life goes on for us, even when it is not entirely fair or just, is what we feel is normal and right. Our instinct is not to let it change and to protect what feels secure. Terry tells about counseling couples preparing for marriage. He encourages them to understand that they are not just marrying a person, they are marrying into a whole family system – a community – that has shaped the habits and understandings of the person sitting across from them – everything from how they observe holidays so what they do with their dirty laundry! So we know that we are always at risk for bias or a lack of perspective about many things in the world.

Since this is Labor Day weekend, one of those matters for me involves the issue of labor – unions, organizing, and so on. My family did not have a background with that history and my dad was pretty biased – he

believed that, like the Teamsters, most unions were corrupt. My work

history when I was young was pretty benign, I liked the jobs I had at the local theater and hospital and clothing store so I never felt misused and if I had, I knew that there were people who would speak up for me in my family or community.

I began to gain a larger view of the world though, as I ventured further from home and learned more about the working world. I listened to people like Studs Terkel, the crusty old Chicago writer who told the stories of working Americans better than anyone else. He

said once that he enjoyed going on Labor Day into to the financial district of the city and to stand on the street corner waiting for the light to turn next to some well-dressed young couple in their pin-striped suits and to begin to

expound about the benefits of the labor movement which brought an end

to child labor and gift of the eight hour day. He laughed and said that most moved away from him as fast as they could but he suspected

that they really didn't know what they should about what the labor

movement had achieved in American history.

I didn't know that much about the labor movement either but that changed a little when I

agreed to be part of the formation of an interfaith organization about a decade ago that focused on the concerns of people, primarily Hispanics, who were marginalized in the workplace in Southern

Wisconsin. A research organization that tracks income and the cost of living

joined with the faith community and others to publish a report in 2001 called "Can't Afford to Lose a Bad Job." The fact-finding delegation included a union representative, staff from Centro Hispano, and the Hispanic Ministry coordinator for the Madison Catholic Diocese.

The report's findings revealed a very challenging set of concerns: having

to juggle many low-wage jobs, unstable and inflexible work schedules, dangerous working conditions, fear of reprisals for any complaints, racial profiling, unequal treatment, harassment, high rents and crowded homes, lack of affordable or safe child care, little sleep and lots of stress but – for those who wondered why these workers put up

with this – an even worse life in the nations from which many of the families interviewed had come, and the opportunity to send money home

to support families there.

The stories were often heart-rending – one woman worked from 10:30 pm

to 6:30 am cleaning classrooms and offices, then worked at a food establishment for eight hours, and then did janitorial work at a temp agency for four hours. She was sleeping three hours/night. Another worked as one of two laundresses in a 200 room hotel. Washing and folding the laundry was more than the two of them could do but they were told that if they didn't like it they should go somewhere else.

One group of housekeepers in a hotel did complain to management about

the excessive number of rooms to clean without the needed supplies.

But when it came time to meet with the boss, only three did so, and they were immediately fired.

Bishop Hanson has said that wherever we work, there may be opportunities to live out our baptismal calling in lives of service and witness. That came about for the board of the Interfaith

Coalition in 2002 when they formed a Worker's Rights Center. In its first nine years, it helped thousands of workers save their jobs, assisted in recovering over a quarter of a million dollars in unpaid wages, and assisted workers who needed them with referrals to government and social service agencies. It has provided basic rights training to thousands of workers and offered training for employers on the rights of their employees.

At the core of theology for Martin Luther is the call to faith in a God whose love is unimaginably great, broad, and deep. God's love embraces all aspects of our physical and emotional lives and God intends, as Luther wrote about the 4th Petition of the Lord's Prayer ("Give us this day our daily bread") in his Large Catechism, that we all have "everything required to satisfy our bodily needs such as food and clothing, house and home, fields and flocks, money and property." He saw the process of obtaining what we need, our labor, as a holy act when performed in faith and gratitude, where "picking up a piece of straw" could be equal in God's eyes to formal prayer and study.

Luther also believed, that as Jesus spoke to the Pharisees in Mark 7,

that our faith in God will result in righteous action. His explanation of the 7th Commandment (thou shalt not steal), included the following: “To steal is nothing else than to get possession of another’s property wrongfully, which briefly comprehends all kinds of advantage in all sorts of trade to the disadvantage of our neighbor. To steal is not only to empty our neighbor’s coffer and pockets, but to be grasping in the market ... wherever there is trading or taking and giving of money for merchandise or labor. No more shall all the rest prosper who change the open free market into a carrion-pit of extortion and a den of robbery, where the poor are daily overcharged, and new burdens and high prices are imposed.”

Luther would have supported those with legitimate authority acting in the public realm to protect workers’ rights. To him, that is the work of all Christian believers. Bishop Hanson reminds us that is it the ministry of all the baptized to proclaim Christ in word and in deed, to make known God’s love and saving grace. God calls us to work for justice and peace, for those who are unemployed, underemployed or taken advantage of in their work.

God also calls us to live in and tend to our relationships, to be

stewards of our family and friends, to care for God's creation, and to live active lives as informed citizens. So let us give thanks for the rich variety of vocations to which, as a priesthood of believers, we are called, and to support each other in our work. May we be a community that offers mutual support and accountability for God's many callings in our lives as we rejoice in the promises that are new every day.

Let us pray: Lord we ask that you be with all who lay their hands to any useful task. Give each one the just rewards of their labor and the knowledge that their work is good in your sight. AMEN